



«If it's not Love then it's the Bomb». A social drama: selfie and nuclear imaginary in contemporary Politics

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Abstract

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This article aims to investigate some of the events that went through the presidency of Donald Trump until the surreal epilogue of the Capitol Hill assault and the declarations of Nancy Pelosi about preventing the outgoing president from initiating military hostilities, accessing launch codes and even ordering a nuclear attack. In order to investigate the nature of these events it will be useful to use the methodological filter of Richard Schechner's Performance Studies and Jeffrey Alexander's notion of social performance as a symbolic act of strategic nature. In this way it can be possible to see how the Capitol Hill assault and Pelosi's narrative intercepted and influenced the collective imaginary.

Keywords

Performance Studies | Social Imaginary | Liminoid Performance | Capitol Hill Assault | Nuclear Bomb





A few days after the dramatic events of 9/11, Karlheinz Stockhausen caused a worldwide sensation when, during a press conference at a music festival in Hamburg, he defined the attack on the World Trade Center as «the greatest possible work of art in the entire cosmos». It mattered little then – and perhaps it matters even less today – if the composer's statement had been reported in an incomplete, decontextualized, ambiguous or even defamatory manner: it was enough to tarnish a monumental career. Stockhausen had indeed spoken of “a work of art”, but made by Lucifer, the «cosmic spirit of rebellion and anarchy» devoted to destroying creation. In short, he had given a metaphysical and apocalyptic interpretation, not at all celebratory, of the attack. But, more importantly, he had grasped the fundamental element of the dramatic event: *its performative aspect*. As Richard Schechner (2013: 277) pointed out, «doubtlessly, media was part of the plan of attack on 9/11». The choice of objectives and methods, time and distance between the first and second impact: everything had been carefully planned so that it would have the widest impact in terms of audience. It was a direct challenge against the collective imagination, against the idea that the whole world had of New York, a global but American city par excellence; which not by chance was the epicentre of the attack but above all of the “9/11 imaginary” that arose over time.

In a fundamental essay, Jon McKenzie affirms peremptorily: «performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge» (McKenzie, 2001: 18). As Durkheim (2005) stated, in premodern societies performance had an essentially ritual character capable of conveying social representations and generating in the participants a state of “collective effervescence” similar to ecstasy, thus strengthening the social bounds. Durkheim himself (2016), however, admits that modern societies are incapable of arousing in their members those strong emotional states that characterize aboriginal life in moments of ritual concentration: from this point of view, civil rituals appear to be unable of creating a condition of collective effervescence (Mori, 2019: 93). On the other hand, Jeffrey Alexander, while agreeing with Durkheim's theses, believes that, if in modern society we witness an eclipse of the ritual, the symbolic action in general does not fail and, if anything, is recovered in the practical dimension of the performance (Alexander, 2004; Alexander, Mast: 2005).

Using these epistemological filters, it is useful to look at the events that went through the last days of Donald Trump's presidency until the surreal epilogue of the Capitol Hill assault.

During these years, there have been numerous media positions which – with tones now derisive, now almost apocalyptic – have pointed to Trump as a dangerous threat to democracy. On the other hand, in subordinate channels, in extremist platforms, in the most resentful undergrowth of the web, the president has been painted with almost messianic tones. Demonization and exaltation are hyperbolic

exaggerations; but they are just the sides of the same coin. And it is interesting to explore their dynamics in terms of performativity.

In order to investigate the nature of these events, it will be useful to go back to some categories identified by Victor Turner, whose social anthropology has been declined in a completely original way by Richard Schechner. Under the filter and the evolutionary brand of Performance Studies, Turner's categories reveal all their vitality.

We owe to Diana Taylor an interesting development of Performance Theory starting from Turner's category of drama. His contributions are an essential reference for anyone who wants to cast a performative look on American politics, and in particular on the presidency of Donald Trump. Reflecting on performance's power to act directly on the imaginary to reconfigure the social rules, Taylor coined the notion of "animative" (Taylor, 2020) in opposition to Austin's "performative". To illustrate this notion, Taylor recalls that, in August 1968, at the height of a student protest in Mexico, some government officials forced public employees to «hacer presencia» during a counter-protest demonstration. The employees, on that occasion, turned their backs on the speaker and began to bleat, shouting «We are administration sheep». If the government intended to force the employees with its statement (the "performative"), they reacted with an incorporated, relational, oppositional act (the "animative"), which underlined the collective "non-non-presence" of the public employees.

We believe that, for the events we are about to examine, such a clear distinction between "performative" and "animative" is impossible to draw. This is why, even accepting the suggestion of the Taylor's recent reflections, we think it is necessary to go back to the more general categories of Turner's theory, to which she herself refers. In fact, tracing the salient lines of events on a level that is as neutral as possible is a preliminary and indispensable measure for a future and clearer understanding of the facts. When one looks at such a close temporal distance at delicate events such as those involved in turbulent changes of government, it is not possible to identify with certainty where, at the precise juncture, the action of power with its performatives would actually be placed and on which side. Instead, it would be defined the opposition of an "animative" type. "Performative" and "animative", on the other hand, *appear to be both performances within a drama*. And beyond any further definition, the flexibility and resistance of the performative paradigm to any theoretical solicitation and any ideological orientation in the reading of the social and political reality of the contemporary world seems to stand out.

In the light of these considerations, it is useful to look at Alexander's theories on social performance understood as a *symbolic act of a strategic nature* (Alexander, 2004; Alexander, Mast: 2005). If the performance is successful, there is a *fusion* between actors and spectators which results in a cultural extension (i.e. social integration through the imaginary); otherwise, a state of *de-fusion* will be generated.

In fact, it is possible to read Capitol Hill assault as a social drama, i.e. a situation capable of letting latent social tensions surface, a questioning of the norm that forces a redefinition of the social rules (Turner, 1982). Against the background of this social



drama, we will therefore see how the subversive event, activated by reasons of loyalty to the won leader, presented itself alongside the ritual event of the proclamation of the new president.

Turner's insights were born in the context of studies on tribal societies but they show all their flexibility and adaptability to contemporary contexts. We could say that within the social drama of the Capitol Hill assault a powerful conflict emerges between less evident *liminal* elements and more evident *liminoid* instances (Turner, 1987). In tribal societies, liminal events essentially coincide with the rites of passage involving a group of individuals ready to transform their status within the community: in these cases, a momentary reversal of the rules of ordinary life is contemplated. This aspect, however, disappears in industrial and post-industrial societies. And yet the proclamation of a new US president is in fact an event that, in some ways, *can be defined as liminal*: in addition to being clearly configured as a ritual performance, the proclamation can be perceived as a real collective passage, as it leads the community not only from one leadership to another but also beyond the limen between an old way of conceiving the world to a new one, profiling transformations that can exalt or disturb.

In the analysis of the subversive events, elements stand out that allow us to identify them as liminoid phenomena and a symbolic, ritual-like action. By this definition, first, we aim to describe with Turner the Capitol Hill assault as *an event of deliberate disorder* in which the individual free will has the greatest part. Secondly, in accordance with a reading of the liminal more in line with Schechner's theory, we will note how behind the facts it is possible to glimpse a sort of "artistic" engine. These events, in fact, are strongly compromised with an imaginary that finds its most appropriate seat in the arts and – as we shall see – continually calls into question some "myths" of the 21st century, including that of the atomic bomb. The demonstrations in question therefore constitute the privileged channel for the irradiation of ideas which, as we shall observe, have reappeared today in the political debate in a rather unpredictable and sensational way.

1. All the President's Tweets

The phenomena of demonization and exaltation of Trump seem to correspond to a polarity intrinsic to the former president's own language, oscillating between the bright and peremptory attitudes of a commander in chief and the emotionally involved tones used by artists to address their fans. *Can the affective tones of an artist become emotionally implicating in the mouth of a political performer? Can they trigger mass actions?* The questions are fundamental to clarify the events that marked the last days of Trump's presidency. The language used by the former president is in fact the language of a "performing political leader", capable of arousing liminoid collective performances of historical scope. But we have to ask a question: is this an isolated case? Certainly not. These tones characterize political communication in general, in perfect coherence with the aforementioned assumption of McKenzie. As Schechner pointed out:



Public figures are often making belief – enacting the effects they want the receivers of their performances to accept “for real.” When an American president addresses a joint session of Congress or makes a grave announcement of national importance, his appearance is carefully staged so that he can publicly perform his authority. Speaking to Congress, the president has behind him the vice-president and the speaker of the house, while a large American flag provides an appropriately patriotic background. At other times, the national leader may wish to appear as a friend or a good neighbor talking informally with “fellow citizens”. By now, everyone knows these kinds of activities are meticulously staged. Today’s American presidency – at least its public face – is a totally scripted performance that has only been played (as of the 2012 election) by a man (Schechner, 2013: 43).

Of course, for the liminoid collective performance of Capitol Hill assault, identifying a direct causality from an institutional leader is not taken for granted. But if we reason in performative terms, a fundamental aspect of the events cannot escape: some tweets from the president were read as *a premise or an activator of the assault*.

In order to critically frame this fact, as well as the subsequent ones we will talk about, we have to focus on how and to what extent the imaginary is the cornerstone of the new world order in *Mediascape* Era (Appadurai, 1990; 1996). But, as Maria Giovanna Musso states:

L’immaginario, che una volta era il regno del mito e degli dei, oggi si è trasformato prevalentemente nel regno della tecnica, o meglio della tecnologia. [...] L’immaginario *technology based* è un nuovo mondo popolato di artefatti, idee, miti e chimere, le cui forme e il cui senso sono destinate alla diffusione di massa, e sono in grado di attraversare qualunque barriera fisica o culturale (Musso 2019: 129, 134; 2008).

A simple tweet, with its textual content accessible through the smartphone at any time and in any place, is an extraordinary written device for the *presentification* of the public figure. If, on the one hand, it is undeniable that a performance is an event that takes place entirely *in presence*, in the contemporary context – and more than ever in the Covid-19 Era – we witness new modulations, of epochal significance, of the concept of presence. And while an intellectual reflection obliges us to distinguish between presence and mediated instance, an objective analysis of the facts requires us to record how individuals and groups may be invested by a new – and perhaps disturbing – *warning of the presence*, especially of a leader’s presence. The latter, then, through the insertion of a textual content into the omnipresent web, can appear present where its supporters are present, at the forefront. And if it is the co-presence – or the powerful *feeling of co-presence* – of the actors that constitutes an essential requirement for identifying the unity of a performance, in the case of a liminoid performance that passes through the media – and that indeed appears built for the



media – the presentification really seems to guarantee the existence of a compact and disruptive performance.

We observe that technological evolution – which was early and rightly identified as the cause of the rebirth of a civilization of orality alongside the visual one (Havelock, 1986) – today confers a truly unprecedented efficacy to the written word of a political leader: the short messages written by Trump on Twitter were instinctively identified as an integral part of a revolt that seemed to have been waged not only by his supporters but in some way hatched by the president himself. What is striking is the quickness and firmness with which Trump's statements on the social network have been collectively identified as the very cause of the facts. The explosive oscillation of affection and power characterizing some of the latest tweets of the political leader – who more than any other has exploited the pervasive capacity of social media – was considered dangerous to the point of even making a censorship operation necessary.

Thus, the definitive closure of Trump's Twitter account (accompanied by the other ones on Facebook and other minor social networks) has the fundamental importance of an unprecedented landing: in a media industry practically monopolized by Facebook, Twitter and Google: the private entrepreneurs who created a means of communication – we would say: *a way of communicating* – new and so powerful to become also the privileged vehicle of institutional broadcasting, decided of their own free will who could make use of this channel and who could not more.

In a recent article, Erich Schwebel (2021) persuasively states:

Protecting democracy from the power of free speech seems like a paradox.
However, free speech on the internet has never truly been free.

The author goes on to state:

Until this point, promoting right-wing propaganda and accompanying advertising with little metadata has been wildly profitable. But with the Capitol attack, it seems as if the wild west era of monetized political speech online is reaching its end.

It is therefore plausible to expect an ever stronger turn of the screw on the web contents which, ultimately, will demonstrate – if it were not already evident – how the media industry has so much political and economic power to represent to all effects a “state within a state”, as it has first incorporated the constitutional freedom of speech to make profits without providing its users with any responsibility and now uses this freedom to guide the political, cultural and social life of the country and the whole world.

Power of new media. We can wonder: *if Trump's claims had been circulated in a newspaper, would they have had the same effect?*

It is then necessary to reflect on the fact that the forced closure of a social network account – among other things very active such as Trump's – not only blocks the word/action in the present moment, but in fact constitutes – at least in the most



radical case of Twitter, from which all the tweets of the former president have disappeared – a successful attempt at a *damnatio memoriae* that can only apparently be compensated by the dissemination on the web of second-hand contents no longer accessible at the original source. Not even the possibility of accessing the statements that Trump published in parallel on Facebook, the platform on which the old posts are still legible, can fully compensate for the loss. It is legitimate to ask until when the access to Trump's posts will be guaranteed to users: given the clamorous precedent, it is in fact plausible that the radical choice of Twitter can be replicated – for Trump as for any other leader or influential person – by any other private entrepreneur who owns a social network. So that the response from Trump arrived: as an entrepreneur, he said he wanted to create his own communication platform in order to freely exercise the political profession.

Admitting the possibility that Facebook also permanently blocks the former president's account, we must reflect on the fact that the texts twitted by Trump would all appear in second-hand contexts, potentially forced into reconstructions that cannot – nor have to – demand objectivity, detachment, ideological purity. There is an emotional wave from which only historiography (based in theory on reliable sources) can guard against, not journalism that travels at increased speed in the era of the click-baiting. Capitol Hill assault therefore arouse a long-range reflection on the conditions in which future historiography will be operating. A scientifically honest and effective reconstruction will necessarily have to work by crossing texts and facts, precisely because it is true that they constitute a single, great performative episode.

Access to first-hand sources, for example, would allow us to reconstruct the timing of this complex performance with greater accuracy and evaluate, always allowing the benefit of the doubt, the real implication of the texts launched in the air by the boss and captured on the fly by smartphones rioters. But it is necessary to reflect on another aspect of the performance, once again conveyed by smartphone technology.

2. The Army of Selfishness

Lyotard claimed that in the postmodern condition «l'enjeu n'est pas la vérité, mais la performativité» (Lyotard, 1979: 64). In his vision, performativity is intended as a privileged game of self-affirmation and self-legitimation. McKenzie, after twenty years, rightly declared that «in a certain sense, performativity is the postmodern condition» (McKenzie, 2001: 14). On the other hand, Auslander pointed out – in recent times which, with reference to the development of the media in the latter years, seem to be remote geological eras – how live performance has become the means by which media-based representations are "naturalized", a logic that appeals to our nostalgia for what we thought was the *immediate*. All this subverts the relationship between immediate and mediated in a way that is anything but neutral:

If the mediatized image can be recreated in a live setting, it must have been "real" to begin with. This schema resolves (or rather, fails to resolve) into an



impossible oscillation between the two poles of what once seemed a clear opposition: whereas mediatized performance derives its authority from its reference to the live or the real, the live now derives its authority from its reference to the mediatized, which derives its authority from its reference to the live, etc. [...] As the mediatized replaces the live within cultural economy, the live itself incorporates the mediatized both technologically and epistemologically (Auslander, 1999: 38–39).

The dynamics presented by Auslander find particular application in the case we are analysing. Let's take a step back to the violent clashes occurred in Hamburg on the occasion of the G20 in July 2017. A photo that showed an unmasked black bloc taking a selfie against the backdrop of a fire in the square caused much discussion:



It is clear that the proliferation of images ends up, among other things, by inflating the value of the image itself and, transitively, of what the image represents (Musso, 2019: 123). Moreover, due to the technological evolution that makes images increasingly difficult to verify (*how to distinguish a real image from a modified one? how to trust the expert who guarantees his originality or the opposite?*), the latest forms of resistance to the uncontrolled "power of images" are now giving way to a general suspension of disbelief favoured, on the one hand, by the immersive faculty of contemporary narratives (Rose, 2011) and, on the other, by a *Rezeption in der Zerstreung* (Benjamin, 2001) generalized in the era of Mediascape. What we could call a "general suspension in distraction" has a double effect: it gives power to the great narrative and makes everyone participate in it. Yet we observe that only a few years ago a sort of defence mechanism (i.e. to consider with suspicion narratives, also and above all photographic, that appeared surrealistic) was still widespread. Yet, it is necessary to point out the power exercised by the image, whether it is true or false. As D'Andrea and Grassi note:

Il *quantum* di differenza qualitativa dell'immagine può far sì che, per quanto essa appaia stereotipata e sterilizzata, resti capace di evocare, anche di realizzare l'ambivalenza e la polisemanticità del reale, mostrandola costantemente a fruitori/consumatori disattenti che per suo tramite possono tornarne consapevoli (D'Andrea, Grassi, 2019: 63 ss.).

Let's go back to the image of the black bloc at the G20: we must ask ourselves which aspect of this product aroused so much suspicion. Certainly not a photographic evidence of guilty or indifference of the portrayed man. In fact, although the fire, the covered faces and the crowd in the background can arouse some kind of emotional response in the observer, the scene doesn't contain highly disturbing elements (e.g. the presence of a victim). It is necessary to consider which contents of a photographic object are most commonly capable of evoking negative emotions in the observer, in turn capable of defending himself with disbelief. Let's assume that a victim appeared in the image. In this case it would have been possible *a)* to identify the man in the foreground with a plausible executioner withdrawing *post eventum* or *b)* to blame him for his ostentatious indifference. But nothing similar is present in this image. What caused scandal and disbelief, in fact, was the very action of photographing oneself: *this appeared as a sensational act of narcissism.*

Let us focus on the image. It is clearly second-hand, captured by an outside photographer who frames the man taking a selfie in the foreground and the riot in the background. For our purposes, it matters relatively that the outside photographer intended to offer a comment – moralistic? ironic? more simply responding to the same logic of the selfie? – to the captured scene. What matters is that he found interesting the act of a man taking a selfie literally turning away from history. In short, this act was not characterized by an abstraction from the context and by that sort of cognitive isolation that, as we will see, can be noted in the photographic documents of the Capitol Hill assault.

Let's compare this shot and one of the symbolic photos of the assault on Capitol Hill, the one that portrays a pro-Trump protester who penetrates in the *Sancta Sanctorum*, the seat from which Mike Pence should have ratified the election of Joe Biden.

First, it is necessary to consider the nature of the assault. It had as its purpose the interruption of a ritual action approachable to the concept of liminal suggested by Turner (and it does not matter if it is clearly secular in nature, see Schechner, 2013: 53 ss.). The logic behind the revolt is clear: *if Biden cannot be proclaimed, Biden will not be president.* Absurd and typically modern? Not so much, perhaps. Let's consider, for example, the removal of the Stone of Scone – on which the kings of Scotland were ritually crowned – ordered by Edward I of England in 1296 during the war with the Scots responds to this request. By command of the English ruler, the Stone was moved to London and placed under the Coronation Chair of Westminster Abbey. Such an act implied a double effect: on the one hand, it invalidated the future coronations of Scottish kings and, on the other hand, it gave the English king a virtual authority over Scotland such that he posed himself as the "Lord Paramount" of the reluctant kingdom. To stay in the Middle Ages, many other examples could be given:



the *Sainte Ampoule* used for the anointing of the kings of France, the *Romfahrt* necessary for the emperor to see his election confirmed etc.

But let's go back to the Capitol Hill assault: the revolt was configured in this case as a counter-ritual performance aimed at foiling the fateful "yes" and at affirming that the election – on which the suspicion was thrown – could still be avoided by a collective "no". The penetration to Congress is then, clearly, an act of deliberate and conscious desecration of an institutional place.

Let's look the first image: a rioter with a hood pulled down over his face – but suitably armed with a Covid-19 Era mask – shows that he is fully attuned to his action through a (calculated?) screeching with the context.



We see the rioter with a smartphone in hand. Although we cannot verify if he is taking a selfie, the fact that the press interpreted the gesture as such seems significant in itself as well as plausible. But let's go further. The rioter carries out his symbolic action by occupying a specific point in space, a position that should have been occupied by an institutional figure in official dress. The former vice president Mike Pence, in making his political performance, would have been photographed by others: *the institution does not take selfies, it is always portrayed from the outside*. And it is precisely the recovery from the outside that guarantees a possibility of converting the sacralization into parody. But the photo of the man occupying the seat – that is, a point of the ritual space appointed to transform man himself into an institution – is not a mere parody: *it is an intrusive act*. The potential observer of the proclamation scene foils it by jumping into it and doing a *performatively invasive act* that reverses

the subjects (*who observes/who is observed*) and the actions (*being photographed/photographing oneself*). The logic of the inversion of the rules of reality – which for Turner constitutes a momentary, necessary and controlled perturbation of liminal rites – is here used to foil a rite with the pressure of a liminoid manifestation.

On a superficial level, the exercise of the faculty – illegal and remote, but attempted and provisionally successful – to prevent a rite is accompanied by the action of desacralizing the place that would have been the stage. The desecration takes place with the replacement of a public show with the individual show of the rioter, at the service of himself and possibly of his followers. On a deeper level, the logic of the inversion of reality is revealed and expresses the will of the demonstrator. This image therefore reveals instances that are partly similar, but more advanced than those raised in the case of the Hamburg black bloc.

In order to define the contours of the Washington events, it must be noted that the press has drawn on a rather obsolete lexicon, deriving directly from the perception of the Capitol Hill assault as an action unheard but also, in some ways, similar to others that the collective imagination places in an indefinite past: e.g. subversive movements, pitchforks, revolutions etc. Assuming this traditional lexicon with the due caution, it seems appropriate to us to call into question a *narcissistic type* of performance, which seemed to us to characterize the performance narrated by the image of the G8 in Hamburg, and an *individualistic type* of performance emerging in the Capitol Hill assault. If, in fact, the requests for emergence of the individual with respect to the context allows both performances to be recorded in the liminoid, the one that took place at the Congress shows a more pronounced personal affirmation.

As we said, the performance of the G20 black bloc was simply self-referential; the performance of the Capitol Hill rioter, in the context of the interior consecrated to the institution in the performance of its functions, represents instead a moment of profound detachment from the events outside the Capitol. The act of the selfie is, therefore, a markedly isolated episode within a revolt and tells of its fragmentation into individual episodes: different images of individualism come from that room and from other interiors of the Capitol.

The photo taken in Nancy Pelosi's studio is paired with the first: a man is photographed as he rests his feet on the Speaker's desk.





Behind the apparently natural pose, a high level of construction seems to be noticeable: even the look of the man – which in performative terms never plays a neutral or secondary role – is immediately perceived as almost stereotyped: cap, shirt of flannel, jeans and boots. One couldn't be more "Average Joe" than this.

The desecrating intent is similar to that observed for the first shot, although the place is ritually less significant. Therefore, if we want to deepen the performative dynamics through images, we are immediately confronted with the layered complexity of the event. These photos raise questions about the fragmentation of the collective performance of the revolt into episodes of individualism that appear jarring with respect to the common idea of a mass movement, which describes the terminological horizon we mentioned above. This is assessed not so much with respect to the ideological assumptions of the act, as with respect to what one is inclined to expect from a "standard" revolt in performative terms: the usual choreography of the stalemate between blocks of rioters and police, the scenes of mass fight, the scenography of the buildings, "standards" that other images of the Capitol Hill assault guarantee.

Of course, since the dawn of time narratives of the revolts have taught that such collective performances are destined to crash on the rock of opportunity, to explode on the wave of excitement in individual episodes. However, the very possibility of capturing photographically or self-photographically these individual acts cut out of the context says something new about them: the performance itself and the "performance of a performance" (i.e. the selfie), reveal that narcissism-individualism

is – for the performer but also for his followers – the most significant nucleus of a specifically individual action that projects itself in the media as a collective act.

Given the liminoid nature of the selfie performance, we could also compare these photographic documents with images from specifically artistic contexts. Countless paintings represent battles or riots, numerous war movies tell individual episodes within collective events. Art tells us of acts of narcissism or individualism, but taken from the outside. A painter or a director observes the individual actions in the context of a collective movement. The use of the smartphone, documented by the photos of the liminoid event that we are examining, allows instead to immortalize *the self-awareness of a single man of being as an individual in history*, whether its background is exposed – as in the case of the G20 selfie – or is removed – as in the case of the rioter on the Congress seat –. In these cases, we are not faced with a raider who carves out his own advantage from the disorder in which he participated. *The individual dimension is intrinsic to the collective one.* Looking at the photographic documents of the Capitol Hill assault, one would rather seem to witness a typical direction of Hollywood blockbusters – from *Star Wars* to *Avengers* –, in which the battles alternate large mass scenes and scenes in which the heroes, often isolated, face in duel the villain or perform actions that will decide the fate of the whole war.



In front of the images mediated by art, it can be questioned about the degree of convinced participation of the subjects who were there. The painter or the director offer a comment through their technique, the viewer will then decide on the basis of how he will perceive the painting or the movie. In the case in question, however, the degree of involvement in the performance is recorded by the act of the selfie itself. The selfie author immortalizes himself as a clearly recognizable person; and the fact that he is carrying out an act full of symbolic significance resonates on the social networks. It doesn't matter that there is a deep and refined awareness of the gesture. It could also be the simple display of a braggart. No matter what shape it takes, it is an ideological action, aware of its own desecrating power. The intellectual preparation of the subject does not take in account. What matters is the intention, the "ideological quality", which is however witnessed from this act in which the subject shows himself as the assertive protagonist of a subversion. In short, the selfie discovers the nerve of self-represented will and shows the weakness of the logic of collective action.

Furthermore, even when it is not an individual selfie, as we will see immediately, it is even believed that photography aimed at oneself together with others is able to reveal "hidden", otherwise marginal, aspects of the facts.

There has been a lot of discussion about a video, of which we report the most eloquent frame:



Here we are faced with a selfie that portrays a potentially compromising couple: a rioter and a security guard in a plausible episode of sympathy. Not surprisingly, a user who is watching the live comments: «HEY POLICE DO SOMETHING WE ARE ALL WATCHING». An authority is therefore invoked to decide on the power of the selfie itself: does it constitute evidence of ideological compromise, of active complicity or not? These questions are crucial for the legal assessment in the present and for the historiographical reconstruction in the future. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves whether it is advisable to develop a sensitivity and a capacity for exegesis of the performative which unfortunately appears far from settling within the competences of the average citizen, of the press, of those called to judge in official contexts.

If, as we have seen, the selfie undoubtedly reveals itself as a means of defining individualism or complicity within a collective performance, the underlying logic is now able to dialogue, as we will see shortly, with other liminoid but more traditional practices of managing one's image. In their mutual trade, more conventional forms of self-manifestation and emerging forms such as selfies are invigorated. It is suggestive to look, albeit cursory, at some episodes of reaction to the events in Washington precisely because of the similarly liminoid nature that can be recognized in them. We refer to the video message with which Arnold Schwarzenegger addresses his stern appeal to America for peace:



The actor/governor brings to the fore, in his own person, that coincidence – suggestive, as well as significantly familiar to American culture and not only – of acting professionalism and political commitment (see Schechner, 2013: 40) that can also be expressed in liminoid performances such as Schwarzenegger's video message on 11 January 2021. A political actor tends to generate liminoid performances, precisely by virtue of the coincidence he bears: in him lives the "Stockhausen paradox" evoked at the beginning of this essay, or the impressive tangency of art and politics. Let's give a look to the scene. Behind the politician, governor of California until 2011, it is possible to observe, between the flags of California and the United States, the portrait in forceful pose of the actor. But his liminoid act goes far beyond the evocation, through the photographic means of an imaginary that belongs to his biographical person: he also verbally packages a significant imaginative pastiche in which are recklessly juxtaposed the presidency of Trump and the fields of extermination of the Nazis. His speech, loaded with a reference to historical facts but entered into myth, anticipates a question that we will develop further, on the use of historical/mythographic heritage within and on the side-lines of Capitol Hill performance.

3. Mr. Shaman goes to Hollywood

Let's go back to the broader horizon of the global representation of Capitol Hill assault, trying to grasp the aspects that can be more representative in terms of performance. That the assault is an extraordinary achievement is even underlined by an artistic product: in a 1999 episode of *The Simpsons* titled *Beyond Blunderdome* (S.11, Ep. 1), Homer helps Mel Gibson remake Frank Capra's classic *Mr. Smith goes to*

Hollywood, eventually turning it into an action movie. In the original, the character played by James Stewart speaks for 23 hours in a row, unmasking his opponents and, in fact, winning by the force of words. Mel Gibson ends it all with a gruesome shooting inside the Congress, turned into a battlefield.



These scenes actually constitute a parody of Capra's movie. If it hadn't been twenty years since *Beyond Blunderdome*, a stringent postmodern logic could have referred these scenes to the assault carried out by Trump supporters. However, pushing this logic to extreme consequences and thinking in terms of compromise between artistic and political performances, it is necessary to reflect on the suggestive relationship that is instinctively established by observing the two "products": the episode of *The Simpsons* and the real Capitol Hill assault, in some ways no less parodic.



To immortalize the differently parodic representation that we are analysing, let's consider again the role played by the smartphone in the realization/memorization of the small highlight acted by a character identified among the main agitators of the revolt, Jake Angeli, the so-called "QAnon Shaman". The shot that portrays him posing in the Congress hall shows a crowd of smartphones at the foot of the bench where we saw the first rioter.



There are four men in this image. The first one is Angeli, striking a pose above the stage. The three below have smartphones in their hand; they are respectively:

- talking on the phone, ignoring the scene that is represented on stage;
- filming the scene on stage;
- filming the man who is filming the scene on stage.

It is clear that the shot symbolically stops an action *that was a performance* – obviously in motion –; though the moment captured by the static image is highly significant, precisely because the imaginary of the story is recorded to survive exactly while the facts are happening.

We can imagine, in relation to the respective points identified above, the existence of:

- *a general, oral account* of the event that is taking place, told by the first character of the trio via phone: the revolt has reached the heart of the Congress, the man seems to say «Yes, we did it, we are here»;
- *a specific, iconic story* of the key episode now taking place on stage, told by the second character via photos or videos: «Look, a guy in Viking clothes stands triumphantly in the heart of the Congress».

- a second level story, told not only by the third character of the trio, but also by the outside photographer of the shot that we are observing. The latter is filming the story as it unfolds, including the secondary characters. The interest of those who film, like ours, underlines that what is happening is not a trivial episode, but a fact that is entering history.

And then there is the scene on the stage: the oscillation between narcissism and individualism has its greatest manifestation here. This is not a selfie, but something more "institutionalized" since Angeli does not take photographs but is photographed. And in the most classic way: striking the pose of a victor with a conquered flag – for himself? for Trump? –. The gesture strikes because it is a sort of classical performance – Apollonian if it were not for the Dionysian costume –, therefore destined to affect more deeply in the memory and in the collective imagination. We are facing the umpteenth realization of a narrative formula that – in semiotic terms – is more overused than those described by selfies. Yet, although triter, this narrative is more effective, precisely because it is more familiar than the others, in collective terms (see Gottschall, 2012).

Jake Angeli, as the self-appointed leader of the uprising, is celebrated because he is the author of a major performance. What distinguishes him from the others? Especially his picturesque look. In his hand he holds the US flag and his face is painted red, white and blue, but he is dressed as a Viking – or, according to him, as a shaman – and his exposed torso shows numerous tattoos with Norse motifs. He draws his outfit from a "global imaginary": he is not dressed, for example, like a cowboy or Uncle Sam. His performance uses symbols that are not – or not only – unequivocally American.

As Luca Mori points out:

Dato che [...] la performance costituisce un'azione strategica, è evidente come essa necessiti di tutta una procedura preparatoria necessaria alla sua esecuzione. In primo luogo, è necessario elaborare uno *script*, vale a dire un copione a cui attenersi durante la rappresentazione. In genere tale script è redatto sulla base delle rappresentazioni sociali consolidate negli immaginari già esistenti. A tal riguardo Alexander parla di *foreground scripts* e di *background representations* (Mori 2019: 105; cfr. Alexander 2004).

Therefore, just as the French Revolution wore the clothes of the Roman Republic (Marx, 1977: 45), the Capitol Hill assault wears those of a distant, even mythical past confused with the classicism of the heroic depictions of the American Revolution.

If America has undoubtedly drawn largely on self-referential reservoirs of myths, today the reuse falls on European materials which, in return, serve to describe the different realizations: this is the performance of a man who has been nicknamed "the Shaman" or "the Viking". It would seem necessary to recall another myth, that of the Vikings as the first colonizers of America to remember that it is *an American performance*.



It is impossible to analyse here the "mythological background" of Trumpism. However, wondering what are the American myths that the performance has reactivated, even beyond its borders, on a political and mediatic level, is a must.

In conclusion, one may ask: if the Capitol Hill assault was doomed to failure, why was it launched anyway? In light of the theories of Turner, Schechner and Alexander, it is perhaps necessary to think that the effectiveness of the counter-ritual act was not so much in pursuing the declared but unrealistic intent to stop the rite in progress (i.e. the election of the President), but rather in generating a collective effervescence – or, more than anything else, a frenzy – capable of promoting a *fusion* in the large social segment of the "discontented", disrupted after Trump's electoral defeat; thus, among other things, laying the foundations for the continuation of the future "battle of/for Trump" even after the – inevitable – election of the new US President.

In the European debate following the Washington events, the attack on World Trade Center was recalled, confirming the perfect state of health of the "9/11 imaginary" with which we opened this reflection. An imaginary which, in that case, was based on facts that really happened. Today America has instead dusted off another myth, powerful and of absolute longevity, on the basis of an event that took place far from the territory of the United States: the myth of the nuclear bomb. For the first time, a terrifying myth is evoked in terms of domestic politics. The question now needs to be asked whether the events in Washington alone were enough to evoke the dreaded performances we are about to talk about, or whether there are more subtle implications to examine.



4. How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

It is becoming increasingly clear today that the imagination is the privileged tool of marketing, politics and soft power (Baudrillard, 1970; Cova, 2003; Codeluppi, 2004; Neilson, 2005; Nye, 2005; Musso, 2019). From this perspective, the conversation between the Speaker of the House, the Democrat Nancy Pelosi, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, gen. Mark Milley, appears particularly interesting. According to the article by David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt in «The New York Times» (January 9, 2021):

Ms. Pelosi appeared to be seeking to have the Pentagon leadership essentially remove Mr. Trump from his authorities as the commander in chief. That could be accomplished by ignoring the president's orders or slowing them by questioning whether they were issued legally.

Pelosi, in particular, would have expressed his concern about Trump, seeking help from Milley to prevent the outgoing president from initiating military hostilities, accessing launch codes and even ordering a nuclear attack:



Ms. Pelosi's request, which she announced to the Democratic caucus as an effort to prevent "an unhinged president" from using the nuclear codes.

To tell the truth, as early as 2017 the Foreign Relations Committee met with an agenda entitled *Authority to order the Use of Nuclear Weapons*, with many Democratic senators exposing their concerns about the decision-making instability of the president. Pelosi has done nothing but re-propose the issue in the moment of Trump's greatest political weakness.

The Speaker could not ignore the procedure for launching nuclear weapons is far more complex than she herself publicly feared. The idea that a single person has the power to unleash a nuclear power is simply apocalyptic; and it seems to draw on the imaginary of the Cold War, during which US and Soviet commanders actually held that authority. Precisely to limit this excessive power, a procedure has been slowly codified since the 1940s, aimed at placing control of the nuclear arsenal in the hands of a "high profile" civilian – as the US president is supposed to be – and to avoid absolute arbitrariness through automated and non-automated checks.

The collective imaginary is well aware of the "black suitcase", called the "football". Less well known is that there are at least three suitcases: one entrusted to the president, one to the vice president and at least one other set aside for particularly emergency events. Now, each briefcase contains everything needed to ensure the chain of command, among the other things a satellite phone with which the president – or his deputy – must contact the National Military Command Center, making himself known through the passwords contained in the "biscuit" (the authentication card which also contains the codes of the missiles to be used). During the phone call, it will be necessary to confer with the secretary of Defense, who theoretically could refuse to carry out the order. There are also additional levels of authorization in the hands of other high-profile characters who will have to simultaneously and voluntarily authenticate the order. The fatal "red button" is only the last link in the chain of command, and it is up to the officers of the nuclear sites to press it when all the safety locks have been removed and the order received. This procedure ensures that, on the one hand, the president cannot decide an attack without the consent of the supervisors and, on the other hand, that the chain of command works even if the president is not in a position to give the order.

Therefore, beyond the fact that Nancy Pelosi could not remove the "football" from the president, it is clear that the latter alone cannot take initiatives of any kind. Is it possible that the Speaker of the House was ignorant of all this? Definitely no. His statements, therefore, must be analysed performatively: and it is clear that in this case the purpose of the message was not to convey a real content – the concrete possibility that an unstable man in a position of absolute but vacillating power would perform an extreme gesture –; the purpose of the message was the message itself, aimed at impeaching the outgoing president; confirming the use by the power of a pervasive storytelling that influences and mystifies – even in blatantly, grotesquely misrepresented forms – the reality (Salmon, 2014).



As stated by Maria Giovanna Musso:

La partita del mutamento sociale si gioca, ancor prima che sul piano della realtà *attualizzata*, nell'universo dei *possibili*, in quel regno dell'eccedenza che è la dimensione immaginaria, in cui si abbozzano i primi schizzi del "reale" prima che il disegno del futuro assuma una forma definibile e venga *realizzato* (Musso, 2019: 116).

It could be said that, in this case, Pelosi makes an instrumental use of the "symbolic capital" that she holds institutionally, that is the ability to orient the way of thinking and representing social reality¹. Of course, the media platform she speaks from only amplifies the reach of her claim, focusing on the message itself rather than on its actual – and, as we saw, questionable – content.

Not surprisingly, in fact, Pelosi's narrative aims to tickle the collective imagination through one of the greatest "myths" of the 21st century, the nuclear bomb. A myth created with the dropping of bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the arms race of the Cold War, but fuelled over time by long-running initiatives such as the Doomsday Clock, created in 1947 by the «Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists» of the University of Chicago to offer a graphic representation of the ideal distance that separated the world from an atomic war. The impact of the Doomsday Clock on popular culture deserves extensive comments: it is enough to mention the song *Two Minutes to Midnight* by Iron Maiden (1984), which focuses on what was then the record of maximum proximity to nuclear midnight, caused by the development of the hydrogen bombs in the US and USSR in 1953.

After all, the myth of the bomb has been widely intercepted and declined by the cinema, with masterpieces such as *Doctor Strangelove* and *Fail-safe* (both from 1964), with the inevitable 007 of *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), with classics of the 1980s such as *Wargames* (1983) and *The Day After* (1983) up to more recent titles such as *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), *Broken Arrow* (1996), *Thirteen Days* (2000) and *The Sum of All Fears* (2002) just to name a few. The myth, on the other hand, has also been put to theme in comics, among which we must at least mention *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and David Gibbons, the postmodern graphic novel *par excellence*, built on the theme of an impending nuclear war between the USA and the USSR, with the inevitable omnipresence of the Doomsday Clock to mark the pages of the comic.



¹ Bourdieu (1980) distinguishes *economic*, *cultural* and *social* capital. Symbolic capital is what emerges from these three basic forms and reacts on them, guaranteeing their legitimacy and reproduction (Mori, 2019: p. 99).



As a corollary to what we say, an Italian article published in «Libero Quotidiano» comments on Trump's departure in these terms: «Donald Trump lascia la Casa Bianca, ma porta con sé qualcosa di *potenzialmente molto pericoloso*. Il presidente uscente degli Stati Uniti, infatti, non solo non parteciperà alla cerimonia di insediamento di Joe Biden, *ma addirittura non consegnerà al suo successore la valigetta atomica, detta anche "football"*» (italics are ours). Needless to say, Trump alone,

especially as outgoing president, could not order anything. What is, then, the purpose of these positions taken by the press, not just in the US? To feed a narrative and, using it, to cast a threatening shadow on an uncomfortable character.



What we have been said before still applies: articles like this strongly tickle the imagination. An imaginary that, postmodernly, seems to us less aware of the reality and more reminiscent of certain scenes from *The Game of Thrones* series: we think of the episode *The Winds of Winter* (S. 6, Ep. 10), in which Queen Cersei Lannister – *ça va sans dire*, the villain on duty – on the day in which the trial that would establish its forfeiture and execution must take place, activates an explosive called the "wildfire", long hidden in the basement of the city of King's Landing, causing a terrible explosion that makes massacre of enemies and civilians.



From these reflections, we understand how the nature of the imaginary is both a "formed form" (*Gestalt*) and a "forming form" (*gestaltung*) that acts as a principle for the construction of the reality of human environments (Marzo, 2019: 39). From this point of view, the imaginary is the matrix of social reality (see Berger, Luckmann, 1966; Castoriadis, 1975; Marzo, 2015; Musso, 2019) and any strategy aimed at intercepting it, using it instrumentally or distorting it has clear implications on the social reality itself.

The myth of the atomic bomb is one of the "great narratives" that thrive in our time. We note, incidentally, that the vitality, the power, the ability to influence the collective imagination of myths like this openly contradict a widespread vulgate on the postmodern condition as an era of "crisis of great narratives". Rather, it seems that the old ones have simply been replaced by new ones, perhaps more effective, pervasive, also thanks to the widespread diffusion in contemporary Mediascape. Even the Doomsday clock, which is ultimately nothing more than a metaphor, testifies to the power – we would say: explosive – of figurative speech and narration in today's collective imagination, reconfirming the primal and indisputable human vocation for storytelling. In short, we are still today the tribe called the Story People (Gottschall, 2012) which, on the one hand, continues to feed on narrative performances and, on the other, increasingly ignores its dominant representation effect.



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"If it's not Love then it's the Bomb"

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